

# *Documents on Diplomacy: The Source*

## *A Diplomat in Captivity*

*Extracts from the Diary of Diplomat Robert Ode, Tehran, Iran, 1979-1980*

NOV., 3 1979.

Went to Embassy residence in evening to see movie. After movie was told by Chargé that Consular Section was to be closed the next day so that the front could be repainted where demonstrators had painted slogans. I was surprised to receive this news as I had not heard about it elsewhere.

NOV. 4, 1979.

Since I wasn't sure whether we were expected to work at the Consular Section, in view of what the Chargé had told me last evening, I went to the office just the same at 7:30 as I had quite a bit of work to do anyway. When I got there, however, I found that everyone was coming to work as usual but we were not open to the general public. About 9:00 I was in my office when a young American woman, apparently the wife of an Iranian, was shown into my office as she wanted to obtain her mother-in-law's Iranian passport that had been left at the Consular Section a day or so before for a non-immigrant visa. Just as I was talking to her in an attempt to find out to whom the passport had been issued, when it was left with us, etc., we were told by the Consul General to drop everything and get up to the second floor of the Consular Section. I really didn't know what was happening but was told that a mob had managed to get into the Embassy Compound and, for our own protection, everyone had to go upstairs immediately.

I noticed that the Consul General was removing the visa plates and locking the visa stamping machines. I went upstairs with the American woman and could see a number of young men in the area between the rear of the Consular Section and the Embassy CO-OP store. We were told to sit on the floor in the outer hallway offices. A Marine Security Guard was present and was in contact with the main Embassy building (Chancery) by walkie-talkie. After an hour or so we could hear that the mob, which turned out to be student revolutionaries, were also on the walkie-talkie. The Marine Guard then advised that we were going to evacuate the Consular Section.

There were some visitors on the second floor in the Immigrant Visa Unit and the American Services Unit. I was asked to assist an elderly gentleman, either an American of Iranian origin or an Iranian citizen, I don't know, since he was almost blind and was completely terrified, and to be the first one out of the building.

When we got outside he was met by a relative who took him away in his car. The students outside the Consular Section appeared to be somewhat confused at that point and the Consul General and about four other American members of the Consular Section, of which I was one, started up the street with the intention of going to his residence. When we were about 1 1/2 blocks from the Consular Section we were surrounded by a group of the students, who were armed, and told to return to the Compound. When we protested a shot was fired into the air above our heads.

It was raining moderately at the time. We were taken back to the Compound, being pushed and hurried along the way and forced to put our hands above our heads and then marched to the Embassy residence. After arriving at the residence I had my hands tied behind my back so tightly with nylon cord that circulation was cut off. I was taken upstairs and put alone in a rear bedroom and after a short time was blindfolded. After protesting strongly that the cord was too tight the cord was removed and the blindfold taken off when they tried to feed me some dates and I refused to eat anything I couldn't see. I strongly protested the violation of my diplomatic immunity, but these protests were ignored. I then was required to sit in a chair facing the bedroom wall. Then another older student came in and when I again protested the violation of my diplomatic immunity he confiscated my U.S. Mission Tehran I.D. card. My hands were again tied and I was taken to the Embassy living room on the ground floor where a number of other hostages were gathered. Some students attempted to talk with us, stating how they didn't hate Americans—only our U.S. Government, President Carter, etc. We were given sandwiches and that night I slept on the living room floor. We were not permitted to talk to our fellow hostages and from then on our hands were tied day and night and only removed while we were eating or had to go to the bathroom.

NOV. 5, 1979

After remaining in the living room the next morning I was taken into the Embassy dining room and forced to sit on a dining room chair around the table with about twelve or so other hostages. Our hands were tied to each side of the chair. We could only rest by leaning onto the dining table and resting our head on a small cushion. The drapes were drawn and we were not permitted to talk with the other hostages. At one point my captors also tried to

make me face the wall but I objected since I had no way to rest my head and after considerable objections I was permitted to continue facing the table. Our captors always conversed in stage whispers. We were untied and taken to the toilet as necessary as well as into a small dining room adjacent for meals, then returned to our chairs and again tied to the chair. I slept that night on the floor under the dining table with a piece of drapery for a cover.

NOV., 6. 1979

Spent the day again tied to chairs in the dining room and we were all required to surrender all personal items for "security purposes". I tried to hide my wedding ring and cameo ring that had been given to me by my parents on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday by sitting on them but the following items were forcibly taken from me and my pockets emptied except for some Iranian coins.

- 1 — Gold band wedding ring
- 1 — Gold cameo ring
- 1 — Timex wrist watch
- 1 — Ball point pen with "American President Lines" insignia
- 1 — Pocket comb in Florentine leather case
- 1 — Set of apartment and luggage keys
- 1 — Brown imitation leather notebook

Just after I had gone to bed on the floor under the dining table, I was aroused, handcuffed to another hostage, a blanket was placed over my head, and I was taken in a car or small bus to another building which turned out to be the "warehouse" (building formerly used for certain sensitive equipment). I was placed in a large room with approximately 20 other hostages. It was very hot, almost no ventilation. I had to sleep on a hard floor with only one small pillow cushion. Blankets not necessary as it was so beastly hot. Remained in this warehouse about one week. Toilets were filthy. Had to be blindfolded to go to toilets. Took first shower—water cold—also washed out shirt and underwear in shower stall while taking shower. While in the warehouse a number of the hostages had their valuables returned to them but I was not one of them. On November 9<sup>th</sup>, my 22<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary, I begged to have my wedding ring returned but repeated requests were to no avail. While in the warehouse, TV camera crew took films of hostages. I objected and gave them the "finger" (up yours) sign. My hands were kept tied. However, I managed to loosen my bonds during the night to enable me to sleep a little more comfortably. We were given toothbrushes and toothpaste and also some books to read that had been stored in the warehouse by the American High School of Tehran when it closed up during the previous revolution.

NOV. 13. 1979 (APPROXIMATELY)

I remained in the warehouse until approximately this date when I was awakened sometime during the night, again blindfolded handcuffed, and a blanket placed over my head and again taken

in a vehicle to another location which turned out to be the Ambassador's bedroom on the second floor, southeast corner of the Embassy residence. I again slept on the floor with student guards in the room, lights burning all night, always much talking, whispering, and coming and going by the student guards. During the day the drapes were closed and we were required to sit on chairs facing the wall. There were approximately five other hostages in this room but we were not permitted to converse with each other. Our hands were kept tied day and night. Since the bathroom adjoined this room it was not necessary to be blindfolded to go to the bathroom but we always had to request permission. At night we slept on the floor. I was given a bathroom rug to lie on to make the floor less uncomfortable and was given a warm blanket. Sometimes I was tied to the chair, rather than just having my hands tied. Sitting in a chair all day long was extremely tiresome. While in this room I was issued a Scottish lamb's wool sweater and a pair of underwear briefs from our Embassy CO-OP supply. We also received a visit from the Pope's representative—a fat, dumpy little Italian who saw me reading a book, tapped me on the arm and clucked *Molto buono* and *Pazienza*. We also had three representatives from diplomatic missions in Tehran. Was told one was Belgian, another Syrian, and the third one I don't recall. They just walked through—had no conversation with us, and just looked at us as though we were animals in a zoo! On or about November 14, I was taken downstairs and asked to sign a statement requesting our Government to return the Shah so that we could be freed. I told my captors that it was useless since I knew that our Government would not do so, but that I was willing to sign the petition just because I knew that it was a useless gesture. I noted that my name was #36 on the list of signers. At another time I had to complete a mimeographed form giving personal data such as my name, birth date, position in the Embassy and my duties. I again protested the violation of my diplomatic immunity in writing on this form.

NOV. 25 OR 26 (APPROXIMATELY)

During the night of Nov. 25 or 26, I was awakened, blindfolded and handcuffed, and taken in a vehicle to another location off the Embassy Compound, which I estimated to be about 10 to 15 minutes distant by car. This turned out to be a private residence that apparently had been abandoned and then taken over by student "squatters". I was placed in an upstairs room together with David Roeder, Assistant Air Attaché. There were two beds in the room with mattresses. Room was very chilly but an electric heater was placed in the room and we were given extra blankets. Bed had pillow and sheet. Here Dave and I were allowed to talk as long as we didn't talk too loudly; were given a chess set and I taught Dave how to play. Also, no guards stayed in the room with us and we could turn our lights out at night. The bathroom was across the hall and we were not blindfolded when going to the bathroom. The bathroom was filthy, as usual. After a few days heat came

into radiators in our room and we had warm water for a standing bath with hand held "telephone type" shower (the tub was too dirty to sit in). Bathroom floor was usually swimming in water and dirty. We had to wash our dishes in the sink in this bathroom. While student guards did not occupy our room continuously they were always present in the wide hallway with automatic rifle or machine gun. One night a shot was fired, apparently by accident. Permission had to be requested to use the bathroom for toilet purposes or doing our dishes, but we were not blindfolded. However, we never saw any of the other hostages who were on the same floor. Venetian blinds were always closed in our room and the window was covered inside and out with newspapers. Our hands were not kept tied while in this house. We had reading material, books but no newspapers or current magazines, and we played chess and exercised in our room. Food at the private residence was poor, as any food sent from the Embassy residence kitchen was usually cold when we got it. Things prepared at the private residence usually consisted of warmed up, canned soups, canned ravioli or spaghetti and meat balls. Ugh! Our Thanksgiving Dinner consisted of canned soup!

One day I was required to tell where I lived in Tehran. I honestly could not remember the name of the street or my phone number. However, they would not believe me and I was told it would go "very hard" on me if I didn't give them the information, so I drew them a diagram on how to find my apartment.

Note: While still in the Ambassadors' bedroom at the residence we were given a short preprinted form letter prepared by the International Red Cross to write our families. The form was sufficient for only about six lines of correspondence. I refused to use this form as I felt that the Iranian mail system was adequate if we were to be permitted to write. Students tried to force me to use this form but I refused. As far as I am aware, no one who did use this form received a reply from the recipient who also had to complete another 6-line space on the form.

#### DECEMBER 6, 1979 (APPROXIMATELY)

On or about the night of Dec. 6-7 we were awakened about 1:30 a.m., told to dress and get ready to move. I thought that this time we were going to be released and prayed fervently that such would be the case. We were again blindfolded, our hands were tied, a blanket was placed over my head, and I was led out of the building into a vehicle which seemed to be a small van or bus. When we arrived at our destination I realized we were back again on the Embassy Compound as I could hear the usual night-long demonstrations, amplifiers, etc.

When my blindfold was removed I found that Dave Roeder and I were in a study at the Embassy residence, separated from the Ambassador's bedroom where we were formerly by the Ambassador's bathroom which by now was much filthier than even before! That night I slept on a sofa (too short for me) and Dave was again on the floor. After that night I too had to sleep on the floor. Dave had been next to me in the Ambassador's bedroom but we were not permitted to speak to each other. Here again we were not permitted to speak, had a guard in our room at all times, day and night, and a light was kept burning in our room all night. Since the bathroom was adjacent, we didn't have to be blindfolded to go to the toilet but our hands were again tied except when we had to use the bathroom and when we were eating. The next day we were joined by Al Golocinski, the Security Officer. Since both Dave and Al smoked I took the daily cigarette ration of four cigarettes and shared mine with them.

#### DECEMBER 9, 1979

The night of December 9<sup>th</sup>, Dave was taken from the room about nine or ten p.m. and wasn't returned until about 5:00 a.m. the next morning. I later learned he had been thoroughly interrogated. The following night he was taken out again and did not return. He was replaced in the room by an American named John Limbert. That was the last I saw of Dave Roeder.

#### DECEMBER 11, 1979

About 1:30 or 2:00 a.m.—I was awakened, blindfolded and taken to another room in the residence; a bedroom at the southwest corner. I was given a mattress to lie on. Shortly thereafter two other hostages, Bruce German, B&F Officer, and Robert Blucher, Commercial Attaché, were brought into the room to replace Barry Rosen and another hostage who were taken elsewhere. Although the drapes were drawn at all times and we had the usual guard in the room 24 hours a day and a light burning all night, as usual, it was, in general, a more comfortable room, as we had a bathroom leading off our room that, at first, was fairly clean, and was not used by too many others. The toilet was fairly clean and worked properly and we had warm water for showers, shaving and washing our dishes. The usual restrictions remained—no talking, hands tied at all times. We were given a Gillette "Trac II" safety razor and a can of shaving soap for our own use so I shaved off my accumulated beard of 38 days, leaving only a "goatee". We could shower and wash our underwear and socks as often as we wished. From time to time we were blindfolded, a blanket placed over our head and were taken to a walled-in enclosure off the residence kitchen for about 15 minutes of exercise.



**DECEMBER 12 AND 14 (APPROXIMATELY)**

On December 14 I was taken out doors for the first time for exercise—my 41<sup>st</sup> day of captivity! Although I had been exercising in my room by pacing back and forth as much as possible, being out in the fresh air for the first time made me feel almost as though I had just gotten up from a hospital bed for the first time after a long period in the hospital! I actually felt rather weak and wobbly! One of the guards asked me why I didn't jump around and exercised more vigorously, rather than just walk around in the yard, but I actually couldn't—just felt too weak! Either on December 12 or 14 I was given two letters that had arrived from Rita, as well as one from Grandma Bode! I was delighted to receive them—the first that I had heard from anyone and noted that the address was the “Iran Working Group, Wash. D.C.” However, I had to return the letters to my captors after having read them, and was not allowed to retain them in my possession, even though I protested that they were personal letters from my wife and a friend. I immediately answered them and was told that I could now write as often as I wished. I had to request paper, envelopes and a ball-point pen from the guard on duty each time and had to return the pen and any unused paper as I wasn't permitted to retain them. At that moment, I was the only one in my room to receive mail. I felt badly about this as I knew that, Bruce German in particular, was very worried about his wife and children.

**DECEMBER 16, 1979**

When I had been exercising outdoors I had again asked the guard on duty who appeared to be one of the “leaders” of the students if I could have my wedding ring and my cameo ring returned to me. I had made many previous requests but without success. So on my 43<sup>rd</sup> day of captivity, while I was outdoors exercising in the enclosure, this particular student held up a ring and asked if it was mine. Since I didn't have my glasses with me, I could only distinguish that it was a plain gold band. However, he read the inscription inside the ring to me and I ascertained that it was indeed my ring. You can't imagine how grateful I was to have it on my finger again! However, the cameo ring given to me by my parents on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday was still not returned to me.

**DECEMBER 24 AND 25, 1979**

During the day of December 24 we had been told that the Ayatollah Khomeini had proposed to the U.S. that some priests be sent to Tehran to conduct Christmas religious services for the hostages. On Christmas Eve one of the students came to our room with a number of blank Christmas cards asking whether we wanted to write them to our families. Since I knew that they wouldn't receive them until long after Christmas, I declined to write any. Then later we were told that priests were coming to conduct services and that they would take them back to the U.S. with them for mailing so I then wrote a short letter to my wife. We sat around waiting for

a couple of hours on Christmas Eve to attend the services but were told that the priest hadn't yet arrived, so we went back to bed. About 2:30 a.m. December 25 we were awakened, told to dress to go downstairs for the services. Our hands were tied as usual and we were blindfolded until just as we entered the residence living room when our hands were untied and our blindfolds removed. We were led into the living room where bright lights were directed at us and cameramen were taking films for TV and stills for newspapers.

Although we had expected that all of us would be in a group for either nondenominational services or a mass for the Catholics, we found instead that only four of us were in the room. . . Bruce German, myself, the U.S. Army hospital corpsman Don Hohman, and one other I didn't know [William Royer—Iran American Society], flanked on both sides by our captors. The room had been decorated for Christmas with a tree, decorations on the walls, and a table with oranges, apples, some Christmas cookies, and Kraft caramels on plates, obviously all this was for public relations (TV), etc., not really to make our Christmas any happier. As nearly as I could determine, the “priests” turned out to be one man—a Rev. Coffin of Riverside Memorial Church in New York who, I later learned, was Dr. Sloan Coffin. He was a large man with a maroon robe who gave us a short talk about how we shouldn't indulge in self-pity (not a very comforting message considering the circumstances) and he then sat at the piano and played a few Christmas carols in which we joined—the four of us.

He apparently had been informed that I was the oldest hostage, as he knew my name and asked me how I was getting along. I told him that if he was under the impression that the students were being kind to us, that it wasn't true. I took one of the plates with an orange, an apple, two Christmas cookies that he had apparently brought with him, and some Kraft caramels. I told him that we could use more fresh fruit as well as more books, as our selection was rather poor. On the floor was a pile of Christmas cards that had been sent to the hostages by Americans in the U.S., apparently as the result of an appeal from a TV newscaster in New York (Alex Paen of WNBC-NY) and Rev. Coffin gave me a handful of about 15-20 cards to take back to my room. I asked him whether he would be available the next day to talk to but he said he wasn't sure. I didn't see him again. We were served a special dinner on Christmas—turkey, sweet potatoes (candied), cranberry jelly, cake and jello. . . .

*Source*

The Carter Presidential Library

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